

POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

Nothing compares to the excitement of having a new baby! Everyone offers congratulations and talks about what a magical time this is for you. With such a joyful event, it seems strange to feel anything other than elation. But parenthood is hard, and before long, there is a long list of less uplifting emotions that start to appear. It is hard to admit that you are not feeling that happy when everyone is telling you how wonderful you should feel, but sometimes you just cannot help it.

No matter how prepared you think you are, the transition from pre-parenthood to parenthood is often more difficult than expected. The stress of having a newborn can be simply overwhelming. Most new parents have never had to experience this sort of sleep deprivation before, and the responsibilities of parenthood can make anyone anxious, or even panicky. After all, as a new parent you are responsible for someone's life, and you may not even feel qualified. Then there is the crying. If you have never experienced it before, then there really is no way to prepare yourself for it. Some babies are "harder" than others (through no fault of your own); you simply get what you get, but the harder, colicky ones can cry for hours!

To top it off, people in their twenties and thirties – the typical age range for new parents – tend to be fairly active and independent. They are used to having a lot of time for hobbies and activities, and then all of a sudden the baby arrives, and there is little time for anything else. Personal interests often fall by the wayside, and the realities of parenthood start to set in. Parenthood is exciting, joyful, and fulfilling, but it can also be monotonous and tedious, especially when you are used to being out and about, and you suddenly cannot even leave the house or find time for a shower.

Even the experienced parents are not immune to stress. The stress of having both an older child and a newborn can be just as overwhelming as the stress of being a first-time parent. Whether it is dealing with a jealous toddler or trying to figure out how to get the older child to soccer practice when the baby is sleeping, it takes a while to learn how to manage the juggling act of having more than one child.

Then, there is the guilt. There certainly is no shortage of things for parents to feel guilty about. There is guilt about having problems with breastfeeding and having to use formula, guilt about not wanting to breastfeed in the first place, guilt about how little time there is to spend with the older children when the new baby is born, and of course, guilt about feeling sad or depressed after the baby is born, when everyone around you is talking about how wonderful things are supposed to be. Guilt can force you to do things that you do not really want to do, whether it is breastfeeding or simply letting your baby "cry it out", when all you really want to do is hold her. When you end up doing the things that you don't really want to do, it usually just makes you feel worse. Give yourself permission to feel how you feel, no matter how you think you are supposed to feel.

Edward M. Pickens, M.D.

There certainly are a lot of reasons for new parents to feel stressed, anxious, sad, or guilty. Everyone with a young baby feels absolutely worn out, frustrated, or even on the edges of sanity from time to time (if you have never felt that way, you are very lucky indeed!). Unfortunately, all of this tends to hit the mothers much harder than the fathers. The fathers often go back to work after a few days, and the mothers have the twenty-four hour job of feeding their babies. Most fathers help out as much as they can, but feelings of jealousy and resentment often work their way to the surface anyway.

No matter how enthusiastic you are, you can only change so many diapers before you need a sanity break. Sometimes, getting away for a little while and recharging your batteries is all it takes to recover. Having three hours of uninterrupted sleep, having an adult conversation away from home, or simply having some alone time can make a world of difference. It might even work better for you to have smaller, daily breaks, when you are totally “off the clock”; having your spouse take total responsibility for your baby, even for just thirty minutes, may be just what you need. If you push yourself too hard, you will crash, and there is no way you can function as a parent when you are that tired.

But, how do you take a decent break when you are nursing a young baby? Of course, the answer depends on your personal feelings on the matter. The textbooks say to pump and have someone else bottle-feed your baby. If that works for you – if you have the extra milk and the energy to pump it – then this plan is not as difficult. However, I cannot tell you how often I talk to mothers who have neither the extra milk nor the energy to pump it. To make matters worse, stress and fatigue will reduce a mother’s milk supply more than anything else.

The decision to use formula really is an emotional crossroads for a lot of mothers, especially when they have made plans that did not include formula. However, if it is a choice between taking a break (and using formula) and not taking a break (and continuing to push past the limits of endurance), I will take the formula every time. In the end, you and your baby will be healthier, both physically and emotionally, than if you had refused a break to avoid using the formula. You will have more energy to interact with your baby and stimulate his or her development, which is far more important than ensuring a diet of nothing but breast milk.

So are we talking about postpartum depression? There are definitions and criteria that are used to make the diagnosis, but I don’t want to get too hung up on the specifics. Most mothers who feel wiped out can bounce back after some time off. But, if you are feeling sad, anxious, tearful, inadequate, or overwhelmed after having a baby, and it does not get better when you get a break, then you probably need some help, regardless of whether you truly meet the definition of postpartum depression. Maybe it is due to the hormone changes after having a baby. Maybe it is because of a genetic predisposition. Maybe you had that tendency before you were pregnant. It doesn’t really matter. Being able to

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identify a cause does not make these feelings any more or less legitimate, and you certainly do not need to justify them to anyone else.

As a pediatrician, I am always on the lookout for signs of postpartum depression. It is impossible to separate baby's health from the mother's health, and your child's pediatrician should always be available to help you get the support you need. However, the first line of defense is often within your own family. Pay attention to your own needs, but also make sure you are aware of your spouse's needs, especially after having a baby. Some people have a really hard time talking about these feelings, especially if they are not used to seeking emotional support. It is uncomfortable, at best, and for some it is completely taboo. But, if what I have described sounds familiar, please remember that you are not the only one who has had these feelings. Help is available, and it could be the first step toward making you a happier and more nurturing parent.